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Sarah Sherman
Northwestern University

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A Case Study:

The Archivist as Activist at the Northwestern University
Library's Women's Collection

Sarah Sherman

The Women's Collection at the Northwestern University Library is like the triathlete: it attempts to engage in that which only extraordinary people or fools try. Like the triathlete, it is sustained by the goal it has set for itself. The Women's Collection documents the activities of activists in the women's liberation movement by collecting materials generated by these activists. The "engagement" or involvement of the curator of the collection is critical to this enterprise, because of the nature of the work. In addition to preservation, which will not be discussed here, there are four primary areas of activity which are necessary to the success of the collection, and each of these activities requires unorthodox solutions and behaviors which, in turn contribute to a heightened sense of tension. (One way I have dealt with the tension is to become firmer in my resolve regarding the value of the mission. Viewing the collection as "triathlete" has intensified, in turn, my attachment to "engagement.")

The Women's Collection was begun in 1970 and initially directed by Roxanne Siefer, who enjoyed the support of the enthusiastic Special Collections staff (all women). Her work was promulgated and sustained by the dynamic team of Richard Press, assistant university librarian for Collection Development, and R. Russell Maylone, curator of the Special Collections Department--then as now. The curator works by identifying where feminist activities are taking place, by contacting the activists, by making material accessible, and by publicizing widely the mission of the collection. Specializing in the feminist periodical press, the newsletters, newspapers,

magazines, and journals produced by the feminist movement worldwide, the collection acquires as well the nonperiodical, nonmanuscript ephemera, such as flyers, notices, position papers, produced by the movement. Monographic works are not its focus, although it does maintain a separate collection of monographic material--at this point approaching two thousand items.

Involvement of the curator in the movement is essential to the success of the collection, because traditional bibliographic methods do not provide the means by which to acquire these materials and because an intimate knowledge of the movement is necessary to make appropriate and effective contacts. The curator engages in activities which require a tremendous amount of flexibility; a willingness to work without firm guidelines; a broad awareness of what the established professions have developed and are developing to deal with materials such as describing them for online data bases or acquiring them from unaffiliated individuals; a solid grasp of the ways and byways of the contemporary women's liberation movement, its breadth and depth; and an ability to work effectively with co-workers, administrators, donors, and potential sources of funds. The conviction that the work of the collection is contributing to potential, needed societal changes makes the work possible.

In the simplest terms, the Women's Collection is collecting material that may fall through the cracks in other libraries. Since it specializes in the periodical press, tremendous burdens are placed on the Serials and Serials Cataloging departments to control the newsletters and journals of feminist groups and collectives who have been and, in some cases, continue to be hostile to institutions and anything that institutions might want of them. These groups do not want to accept institutional "housing" for their materials or flatly do not wish to cooperate with institutional requests. The catalogers, who deal with a whole set of problems which might fall under the rubric of "conventional cataloging" are also asked to

deal, in this instance, with highly unconventional materials. These activities create tensions which, without administrative support, can only be resolved at the lower level by a conviction in the utility of the enterprise. The curator has to be convinced that the work accomplishes a greater good by filling out the historical record and documenting the activities of activists in the movement. Because the essence of the work is catching materials which do fall through the cracks elsewhere, coherence of mission is fundamental and involvement in the movement is both unavoidable and essential.

In order to accomplish the mission, the curator engages in four primary activities: (1) identification, (2) contact or solicitation, (3) organization for access, and (4) outreach. While the first three activities seem to occur in succession, in reality they take place simultaneously, guided by mutual objectives and informing the other activities.

Identifying where feminist activity is taking place requires the curator to have a good understanding of the movement--what informs it and that it is fundamentally diverse. It requires constant vigilance and the time to do the reading required both to ascertain that that specific activity is taking place (although reading is not the sole source) and to keep in touch with what is happening with the movement. The curator must have a sense of where the movement is going and what it looks like from time to time.

It is impossible to collect everything, so selectivity is important. In order to be selective, it is necessary to know when not collecting certain things is appropriate and why. Gaining a sense of the exciting thinkers, activists, and writers, while at the same time understanding that the essence of the movement is the change that takes place at the level of the individual woman--the woman next door as well as the women's group that meets in the church down the street--is also vital. It should be clear if the collection contains what is being produced or, if not, how to get it and if the resources to follow through

on the other end exist. It is necessary to stand back once in a while to see what the shape of the movement is and how successful the collection has been in documenting it. Anticipating what is likely to be happening in the future and, in an approximate kind of way, knowing how much material is likely to be generated in the next several years should also be a part of the curator's work.

Contacting activists--the curator's second activity--requires having enough information to talk with the groups and employing the most effective means of making contact with them. A greater degree of candor and enthusiasm is needed because activists, many of whom are hostile to or flatly opposed to institutions, are being asked to place their materials in an institution. The curator needs to be a forceful (though not aggressive) advocate of the collection. Being able to follow through in actions such as making payment or picking up materials requires the support and resources of the home institution. Prepayment, for example, was actively discouraged in most libraries when collecting started. All sorts of demands are made on the institution and, ultimately, on co-workers within the system. Getting a colleague to make one change is difficult enough; getting a number of colleagues to make many different changes requires supreme diplomacy.

Effective contacts with potential donors requires being open to a range of acquisition possibilities and knowing when they exist. Contacting donors, as is true with virtually all phases of the Women's Collection, requires a willingness to work unconventionally, with a knowledge of how to make the unconventional succeed in the system, such as getting the material which can be dealt with successfully in the system processed there.

An instructive example can be seen in dealings with the foreign feminist periodicals which the collection receives twice a year. I wrote a letter of genuine admiration to the editor of a significant journal to express awe at the editor's accomplishments. While doing so, it occurred to me

that the editor was amassing a significant amount of material which prompted an inquiry about any plans she might have for it. The result has been donations twice a year of hundreds of foreign feminist journals, magazines, and newsletters sent to the collection in two or three little brown boxes.

Last summer (1985), the collection disposed of over eight hundred duplicate items to approximately twenty selected foreign groups. Each group had a usable address and each appeared to be a group that promised interesting material for different reasons. The collective interests of the movement are broad; it is impossible to collect in depth on every issue. These groups were chosen with the thought in mind that they would provide information in sought-after areas. It is particularly important to make effective contacts with the groups--one element of this being simply to make an impression. If what these groups would be most in need of can be determined, the possibility of reaching them is heightened. In each case, these groups were informed of the existence of the collection, were able to "sample" the collection (each of the items in the packages were duplicates and, therefore, representative of the contents of the collection), and were informed of the collection's mission and needs.

The curator's third activity--making the materials accessible--requires a similar level of openness to unconventional solutions. It requires a broad awareness of systems, people, and resources being devised by the professions, and a willingness to meld the best from all of these, to justify conclusions, and to convey them successfully to the key people who will help with carry through. Northwestern is fortunate to be able to pay for subscriptions, maintain them, claim issues, catalog titles, and perform other related activities through the Serials and Serials Cataloging departments. Through them, these often problematic titles are cataloged and described for the online data base. When these departments have performed their magic, the users can search the data base and find records for each title

which give them the information they need in order to utilize the material.

The topical collection of ephemera does not lend itself to description for the online data base, and so the collection has devised several finding aids to access it. This collection comprises 30,000 items in thirty-six legal sized filing cabinet drawers, filed by subject, with subject headings arranged alphabetically. The items are position papers (such as Judy Syfers's "Why I Want a Wife" or Valerie Solanas's "S.C.U.M. Manifesto"), academic or activist papers ("Feminists in Academe"), notices, and other unpublished ephemera. Three finding aids (1) list subject headings with instructions for requesting material; (2) contain file cards for each folder in the collection; and (3) use a three-ring binder notebook to inventory author, title, and subject for subcollections of material (position papers, academic papers) using the subject division devised for the collection. (For example, the heading "Women in Society--Papers" indexes a collection of 125 papers, most authored by sociologists dealing with some facet of the question of woman, her relationship to society, society's relationship to woman/women.) The last noted finding aid accesses 2200 selected items, filed by subject, which reside in the collection.

Decisions about devising subject headings were to every extent possible determined by a painstaking process of letting the material speak for itself. After all, this is material that in the 1970s was not bibliographically controlled--and largely remains so--through the Library of Congress or any of the commercial indexes. Very little attempt was made to force these subject headings into conformance with existing headings, because it would have demanded enormous changes of these systems. Extant headings were completely inappropriate and of no use to the collection; its material is not simply women's material, which still does not have subject access, it is also feminist. This is one example of how attempts to make the collection successful, in this instance by making it useful, are complicated by the lack of viable models.

The fourth area of activity--outreach--is spreading the mission or, more generally, any contact made outside the department. It is important to the success of the collection that it is known widely and broadly. In order for Northwestern University to acquire materials, people everywhere need to know that it is actively soliciting them. Northwestern needs to start this itself, but real success lies in the network of contacts who know about the collection and tell other people. This network should be national as well as international, but it also should be local--within the university library, the broader university community, and the immediate local environment. Communication encompasses a whole range of options--talks, interviews, articles, and publications, as well as areas not yet ventured into such as video and computer options.

As should be clear from the above, the curator must embrace a diverse group of constituencies, with widely divergent needs. In a sense, the sole unity here is the need to introduce the collection to people unfamiliar with it. In each instance, the collection has to be described effectively to them. What constitutes effective description will vary, as it will be based on the curator's assessment of the collection in light of the patron's needs. For the student, orientation designed to get the student to use the online data base to access materials in other parts of the library might serve better than would a strict emphasis on the collection. The student should still be furnished with the information sheet on the collection, to gauge his tolerance for more specific description and to let him know of the collection's availability. Giving students strategies for overcoming the weaknesses of subject access might be more useful in the long run than in-depth orientation to the Women's Collection in the beginning.

A faculty member may be interested in the collection for instruction purposes, but is far more likely to be interested in terms of pursuing some specific research. In many instances, the faculty member will not be interested in the mission of the

collection per se, because she is, for example, an eighteenth century French art historian or a medievalist. However, these people might be interested in acquainting themselves with the array of feminist journals as potential sources for their research. The donor may be interested in knowing that the material will be used. Many donors, however, are as convinced as the curator about the collection's mission and donate because they see the value, have confidence in the collection, and know that the material will be made accessible.

The curator should be able to work with all the resources of the library in which she works. She needs to devise a way to let the various colleagues and co-workers learn about the collection and its mission. It is important to try to communicate the value of the mission in order to enlist their aid. To do this, it is useful to come to grips with co-workers' areas of expertise, their problems, and areas of mutual benefit. It is particularly important that the curator not draw attention to herself in this process.

The picture painted here is of an array of responsibilities for the curator, which are stimulating and can stretch her abilities. In writing this article, I have learned several things. I already knew that I enjoyed the opportunity to experience much of the movement from a very special place. I realize the importance of the mission sustained me. It was solely through conviction that documenting the movement is significant and useful that I was able to summon up the genuine enthusiasm, candor, and energy to do the work. By writing dispassionately and simply about the tasks performed, I have a better understanding of what I was doing and perhaps how dedicated I was appearing. Once laid down, however, the tasks and responsibilities seem less awesome and the mission even more vital.

Sarah Sherman was head of the Women's Collection, Northwestern University Library, from 1974 to 1986.